



Do Low-Fat Foods Really Help?

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Some people have questioned whether today's abundance of low-fat foods is a helpful aid to healthful eating or a marketing ploy that contributes to America's obesity epidemic. A new report examining data from a large federal study of our eating habits concludes that foods modified to be lower in fat can, indeed, help reduce fat intake. But eating reduced-fat foods does not necessarily mean that calorie consumption will go down. Consumers can use reduced-fat foods to help lower their fat intake, but they should remember that an overall healthy eating pattern does more than limit fat. It also supplies the nutrients we need and helps maintain a healthy weight.

The new report, recently published in the *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, examined the intake of more than 14,000 people from the most recently available *Continuing Survey of Food Intake by Individuals (CSFII)*, for 1994-1996. People were categorized based on their use of regular or reduced-fat versions of added fats (like salad dressing), desserts, snacks, cheese and yogurt. Of those who used these foods, 70 percent used only the regular (higher-fat) versions, and 30 percent used a combination of both types. (No one exclusively used reduced-fat versions of all products.)

Among those who used some reduced-fat foods, average fat consumption was about four grams a day lower than those who only used higher fat forms. Four grams may not

seem like much, but it was enough to allow women to meet the recommended standards for total and saturated fat, and to bring men substantially closer to meeting them.

While reduced-fat foods are one way to lower fat consumption, they are clearly not the only way to reach that goal. An earlier study, also published in the *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, looked at a group of people 50 or older who had lowered their fat intake from about 44 percent of calories to about 26 percent, a much larger drop than achieved by the average American population in the latest study. While some of the people in this group increased their use of lower-fat foods, others increased their intake of vegetables, fruits and grains; decreased the amount of fat used in cooking; ate less meat; or reduced their use of all “recreational foods” like desserts, ice cream, sweets and chips.

It’s important to note that, in the new CSFII study, the group that chose to use reduced-fat foods as a strategy to lower overall fat consumption continued to consume as many total calories as the group that exclusively used high-fat versions of the foods tested. That makes sense. Many reduced-fat snacks and foods have higher levels of sugar or other ingredients, resulting in a calorie count that is about the same as the regular versions.

In an earlier analysis of the same CSFII data, those whose total *diet* met the criteria of “low-fat” consumed several hundred calories a day less than those with higher-fat diets. Limiting fat is part of controlling calories for weight control, but it’s not the whole answer. Evidence that Americans’ growing portion sizes are raising our calorie consumption is an example of how simply eating low-fat foods is not enough.

For those who find it easier to cut back on high-fat foods by having reduced-fat versions, using these products can be a helpful strategy. Just remember that low-fat eating is only one part of healthy eating – calorie control and balanced food choices are part of the picture,

too. And keep in mind that a low-fat diet to reduce risk of cancer and heart disease can be achieved without reduced-fat foods.

If you need help to improve your eating habits and prevent weight gain, *Shape Your Future...Your Weigh!*[™] can help. Contact your local Health and Wellness Center (HAWC) or Dietitian for more information.